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ABSTRACT

Key elements of the master's level programs offering majors and/or minors in nursing administration and accredited by the National League for Nursing were assessed. The focus was admission and graduation stipulations and curriculum content. Courses were classified according to content and categorized as either administration, research, generic/support, clinical, or other. For the 70 responding nursing schools, 25 admission requirement categories, 4 graduation requirement categories, and 12 different graduation credit standards of measurement were found. Curriculum analysis was structured around the program's preparation objectives: major concentration or functional role in nursing administration. Of 66 programs, 31 were majors and 35 were functional (19 schools were omitted from program analysis). A total of 824 courses were identified in the 66 programs. Strong curriculum strands were found emphasizing theory, theory development, and in particular, nursing theory content. Similar patterns were found in research curriculum content. Measurable differences were apparent between major and role programs in the categories of administration, clinical, and generic course requirements. (SW)

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An Analysis of Academic Programs Preparing Nursing Administrators

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The need for knowledgeable and skilled nursing administrators has never been greater. Health care has entered a period of dramatic and fundamental change driven by the implementation of Medicare's prospective payment system and the substantial growth of managed health care, reflected in health maintenance organizations and preferred provider arrangements. The role implications generated by this process are substantial. Academic preparation in nursing administration takes on increased importance in an environment characterized by change, challenge and opportunity.

The purpose of this study was to profile and analyze key elements of NLN accredited master's level programs offering majors and/or minors in nursing administration. A literature review yielded commentary by faculty on curriculum perspectives and needs, but reports of a comparative analysis across programs were not found.

The NLN publication, Master's Education in Nursing: Route to Opportunities in Contemporary Nursing, 1984 - 85, was used to identify schools listed as offering academic preparation in nursing administration. A letter expressing interest in nursing administration and requesting information regarding program objectives/content was forwarded to each of the seventy-seven schools included in the study.

Elements selected for review were program stipulations related to admission and graduation, as well as curriculum content. Multiple dimension analysis was the primary method utilized in evaluating the findings. Of primary consideration in the analysis of the qualitative data was the identification of threads or patterns. Specific attention was directed at highlighting consistent and inconsistent themes.

Courses were classified according to content and categorized within one of five areas - administration, research, generic/support, clinical and other. Data were further examined based on a review of the program's preparation objectives - major concentration or functional role. Operational definitions for each of the five categories were developed and reviewed by a panel of experts in educational research. Classification analysis was based on comparison within and among course descriptions, where such was available and/or through matching course titles. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, percentages and measures of central tendency were also employed in the analysis.

Seventy-three schools responded to the letter requesting information between July and October 1985. Seventy schools (95%) provided information on admission requirements. Twenty-five admission requirement categories were identified and analyzed.

A B.S.N. from a NLN accredited school was required by all 70 schools. Licensure in a state was required by 62 schools (89%) and admission testing was mandatory for 60 schools (86%), although testing requisites varied. The GRE was required by 37 schools (52%), the MAT by 9 schools (13%), GRE and the MAT were both required by 3 schools and GRE or MAT for 11 schools (16%).

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Eighty-one percent of the sample schools (57) reported a G.P.A. admission requirement, defined in various manners such as - satisfactory G.P.A., upper level nursing G.P.A., and G.P.A., for overall baccalaureate work. The requirements varied from an overall 2.5 to 3.0, with a 3.0 consistently required for upper level nursing. A basic research course was an admission prerequisite in 83% of the sample.

Forty-nine schools (70%) mandated various numbers of letters of recommendation and personal interviews were required by 24 schools (34%). Among other requirements were a physical assessment course (16 schools), professional goal statement (19 schools), and liability insurance (14), and various amounts of work experience, unique expectations included copies of State Board scores, CPR certification and a signed document agreeing to comply with the school's honor code.

Four graduation requirement categories were identified: G.P.A., comprehensive exams, research, and number of credits. A specific G.P.A. level was reported as a requirement by only 33 schools (47%), and a comprehensive examination by 24 schools (34%). Research activity requirements were typically satisfied by a thesis, research project or an optional group research effort. A non-thesis option was frequently offered as an alternative to the thesis.

Twelve different graduation credit standards of measurement were found. Among them were semester hours, quarter hours, credits, units of advanced study and hours. Irrespective of the measurement standard, the units required, ranged from 16 to 60. The average number required was 40 and the mode was 36.

The curriculum analysis was structured around the programs' preparation objectives - major concentration or functional role in nursing administration. Curriculum analysis was completed for 66 programs from 54 schools (745). Of the 66 programs, 31 were majors (47%) and 35 were functional (53%). Nineteen schools were omitted from program analysis due to factors such as lack of course titles, individualized programs of study, and a lack of curriculum outline, among others.

Eight hundred and twenty-four (824) courses were identified in the 66 programs, by using a coding system with 5 categories: generic/support, research, administration, clinical, and other.

Generic courses were those courses identified as core (except research courses), nursing theory and any course which supports fundamental nursing practice. Conceptual Bases of Nursing, Leadership in Nursing, Physiological Basis of Nursing, Role Theory, Health Care Systems, Professional issues, and Epidemiology were coded as generic courses.

Administration courses were those that contain field work or laboratory and theoretical content in management or administration. Administrative/Organizational Theories, Financial Management, Nursing Administration I, II, III, Role and Function of Nurse Administrators, Staff-Support Services in Nursing and Administrative Practicum were coded as administrative courses.

Clinical Courses were those which support clinical, "Hands on" nursing practice. Perinatal Nursing Practicum, Human Response Patterns (health assessment), Clinical Practicum, and Clinical Electives are a few.

Courses coded as research and other were easily identified. Research courses were those which support research. Research I, II, Thesis, Project and Statistics are representative. Other courses did not fall into any of the above categories. They include Electives, Independent Study, Curriculum and Preparation for Teaching, Religion and Aerobics.

A coding system was used to classify program content. In addition, courses were divided into those with descriptions and those without descriptions. Of the 824 courses found, 66% (539) had descriptions and 34% (285) did not. All 824 were coded, however, only the 530 with descriptions were utilized in the multiple dimension analysis.

Two course categories for major and functional role programs with descriptions revealed similar weights across programs - research and other. Research courses comprised 22% of the administration major's content and 24% of the functional role program content. Courses in the other category comprised 2% of the major and functional role content.

On the other hand, a marked variance was noted in the proportion of administration, clinical and generic categories between major and role. The profile of programs with a major in administration was 21% generic, 52% administration and 4% clinical, while functional role content reflected 37% generic course work, 24% administration and 14% clinical.

Emphasis on administration was twice as heavy in the major, while emphasis on clinical was 3.5 times greater in the role. Generic courses were 1.5 times heavier in the role programs than in the major. A similar distribution pattern was found in the courses without description.

Regardless of program concentration, strong curriculum strands were found emphasizing theory, theory development and, in particular, nursing theory content (134 courses). Similar patterns were found in research curriculum content (101 courses).

Measurable differences were apparent between major and role programs in the categories of administration, clinical and generic course requirements. Administration course content as analyzed in the description statements varied to such a degree that consistent themes or strands could not be identified within or between all programs. One exception was noted. Administrative/Organiza- tional Theories was the course most commonly required across programs (30).

Administrative theoretical content varied markedly between major and role, and a difference was noted regarding administrative practicum experiences. Forty-eight percent of role programs and seventy-seven percent of major programs required administrative practica. Clinical practicum requirements were six times more common in role programs than those with the administration major.

Common or repetitive curriculum patterns in nursing administration course content, in terms of concepts, principles, or commonly accepted areas of administration theory (i.e., staffing, HRD, accounting, finance), could not be identified.

Common threads or curriculum patterns were evident in generic course content. A significant number of programs emphasized nursing theory, theory development, professional issues, leadership, health care systems and role theory.

Within the functional role programs, there was substantial variation in the concentration of administrative courses. The number of these courses required varied from zero to four. Major programs have much greater concentration of administrative courses. Other than the practicum, three common curricular strands emerged - Administrative/Organizational Theories, Financial Management, and a course commonly entitled Nursing Administration I.

Programs consistently allowed little opportunity for course selection in the area of electives in both major and role programs. Where elective selection was possible, it was guided in some way by faculty. The preparation of nurse administrators seems largely prescriptive in nature, irrespective of the student's entry level skills, knowledge and experience.

Suggested Areas for Further Inquiry

1. Recent graduates of nursing administrative programs and their employers should be surveyed on a regular basis to determine their perceptions of preparation effectiveness.

2. Curriculum analyses across all programs, in relation to content standards established by nursing administration educators, should be undertaken, particularly in relation to role preparation.

3. Printed materials designed to communicate educational program content and characteristics should be prepared so as to enhance clarity and promote understanding among perspective students, particularly in an environment of declining enrollment.

4. Comparative analyses between graduate programs in nursing service administration and those in business and health care administration should be undertaken.

5. Admission requirements at the programatic level should be surveyed.

It appears that the number of questions raised by the study exceeds the number of answers resolved by it.